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ROGUE OR RATIONAL STATE?: A NUCLEAR ARMED IRAN AND US COUNTER PROLIFERATION STRATEGY

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Preface

The proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) presents the United States with strategic and regional challenges well into the next century. Clearly the concern centers around those states which for political, ideological, or religious reasons display an “anti-western” or “anti-democratic” sentiment, and soon, will possess some form of nuclear weapons capability. These nations, often termed by the western press as “rogue nations,” have already, either directly or indirectly, committed acts against humanity or acts of terrorism to promote their agenda on the world scene. They’ve been tagged by the western media as the world’s bad boys.

Certainly Iran is considered by many as falling into this category. In fact, President William J. Clinton in early 1995 stated: “Our problem is with the unacceptable behavior of the Iranian government: direct and indirect support for and use of terrorist subversion of states friendly to the United States; military intimidation of its neighbors; and acquisition of weapons and technologies of mass destruction--including nuclear.” This paper will attempt to sort out some of the possible motivations behind Iran’s nuclear weapons procurement, assess their progress in attaining the capability, address potential policy implications for the United States, and finally offer some possible alternatives in dealing with a nuclear armed Iran .

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Abstract

Worldwide proliferation of weapons of mass destruction has risen since the end of the Cold War. This escalation has brought about a new set of challenges for strategists and policy makers within the United States. No longer is the United States facing a single nuclear threat within the relative “security” of a bipolar global arrangement. Rather, emergent nuclear states with marked political, cultural, and ideological differences with the US are on the increase. Iran is one such state. A keystone nation bridging the Middle East with the Near East, Iran is currently pushing the nuclear weapons envelope despite protestations from the global community. The Iranian nuclear problem has vast regional implications not only for the near future, but also presents long term global security issues. What’s motivating Iran to make the leap into the nuclear frying pan? Are the mad mullahs in charge driving Iran toward a course of global terrorism with an “Islamic Bomb”? Or, is the nuclear course within Iran a well thought out process, carefully calculated to maximize strategic leverage in order to gain and maintain regional hegemony? Finally, what are the strategic implications for the United States of a nuclear armed Iran? And, does the current US military strategy of detect, deter, and defend against weapons of mass destruction adequately address this threat?

Chapter 1

Introduction

The atomic bomb is a weapon for aggressors, and the elements of surprise and terror are as intrinsic to it as the fissionable nuclei

—J. Robert Oppenheimer 1945

The era of relative nuclear security under the bipolar blanket is over. The Cold War, despite mutually assured destruction, provided both the United States and former Soviet Union a common strategic framework to play the nuclear game. Both played the game very well, and understood the rules. The nuclear rules as promulgated by the US and former Soviet Union in a series of bilateral agreements and treaties were tested by nearly 50 years of peaceful coexistence. Today, the US is confronted with an entirely new strategic environment. With the dissolution of bipolarism and the corresponding proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), the game has dramatically changed. The nuclear game was manageable because only two teams really played. As the nature of the game shifts from one of global strategic giants playing to series of regional players, proliferation of nuclear weapons adds a new element to politics in places like the Middle East.

The notion, however, of proliferation has always been a concern of the international community. After World War II, the international community lacked any controls over nuclear materials or technology. The US and the then Soviet Union had the technology

but withheld it from their allies. Great Britain, France, and China crossed the nuclear threshold in the 1950s and 1960s, while other nations like France and Israel continued to research and develop nuclear technology. In 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower proposed the “atoms for peace” program to help non-nuclear nations develop civilian nuclear power if they would renounce nuclear weapons.¹ This led, in 1957, to the founding of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as an autonomous agency of the United Nations. The primary responsibility of the IAEA is to verify that nuclear materials are used for energy production only and not diverted to weapon programs. The first overt attempt to curb nuclear proliferation was under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signed in 1968 by the US, Soviet Union, and Great Britain. The NPT is the only global legal instrument through which a state can commit itself to non-nuclear weapon status.² Its primary purpose is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons in order to facilitate an atmosphere in which disarmament can occur. Currently, over 170 countries have signed the NPT. All non-nuclear weapon parties to the NPT must conclude “safeguard agreements” with the IAEA.³ The discovery in 1991 of how advanced Iraq’s nuclear weapons program was and the breakup of the Soviet Union in the same year elevated international concern over nuclear proliferation to a new level of global urgency.⁴ The fact that Iraq, a signatory to the NPT, was able to create a robust nuclear weapons program, despite IAEA inspections, brought the efficacy and credibility of the counter proliferation regime into question. Now it appears too many players have acquired the technology and there’s not much the international community can do about it.

However, the proliferation of nuclear weapons does not in itself lead to conflict--as the US relationship with the former Soviet Union demonstrates. Yet the sudden infusion

of nuclear weapons into an already tense region, or nuclear weapons in the hands of weak states following extremist tendencies, certainly increases the probability of nuclear conflict within a region.⁵ The potential for a bad play in a nuclear game where there are many opponents is high, if the US does not carefully develop a well thought out counter strategy. Carl Builder suggests in a RAND study, *The Nuclear Asymptote: On Containing Nuclear Proliferation*, that the US reconceptualize nonproliferation policies to counter the diffusion of nuclear weapons and WMD technology in areas like the Middle East. Instead of focusing narrowly on weapons and delivery systems, the US ought to look beyond the hardware and concentrate on the leadership, information, military doctrine, training and other intangibles surrounding the nuclear infrastructure.⁶

Indeed, the nuclear proliferation yardstick has been moving with Heisman Trophy winning pace since the demise of the Cold War, and the old rules don't seem to apply at all. The only rule that may still exist is a self-perpetuating (if successful) cultural taboo on nuclear use.⁷ Clearly, the United States needs to articulate its strategy in order to meet the nuclear proliferation challenge posed by states who may not play by any rules.

Nations who either make their own rules or who don't follow established international convention are grouped under the dubious heading of "rogue nations." As described by US leadership, rogue states possess large modern military establishments and covet weapons of mass destruction.⁸ National Security Adviser Anthony Lake asserted in 1994, "These states exhibit a chronic inability to engage constructively with the outside world as demonstrated most clearly by their support of terrorism and pursuit of nuclear and chemical weapons."⁹ Further, Paul Kaminski, the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition and Technology remarked in late 1996 that "rogue nations to which the

calculus of deterrence may not apply in the same way, are acquiring weapons of mass destruction—nuclear, biological and chemical and the means to deliver them with ballistic missiles".¹⁰

Countering the proliferation challenge posed by “rogue nations” is foremost in the articulation of current US national military strategy. In March 1996, then Secretary of Defense William Perry in his annual *Report to the President and the Congress* stated:

Weapons of mass destruction in the hands of a hostile power threaten not only American lives and interests, but also the United States’ ability to project power to key regions of the world. The United States will retain the capacity to retaliate against those who might contemplate the use of WMD, so that the costs of such use will be seen as outweighing the gains.¹¹

As Ashton Carter, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy said in 1996, “If you don’t think the US government is doing anything to combat proliferation, then you don’t know what’s going on. But if you think it’s enough, you don’t know the gravity of the threat and how much more could be done.”¹²

Preventing the proliferation of WMD within a “hostile power” is problematic at best when considering a country like Iran. A nuclear armed Iran will pose a severe challenge to the United States as it enters the 21st century and will force a reformulation of strategy within the region. To fully understand the problem, one must first look at the background and impetus behind Iran’s quest for nuclear weapons and assess where they are in developing the capability.

Persian Paradox

Critical to the proliferation problem in Iran is an attempt to understand first the historical context and how it relates to the desire for nuclear weapons. For the purposes

of this paper, we'll concentrate on the historical dynamic within Iran which continues to play a major part in the formulation of foreign policy and regional interaction. The dynamic, evident as early as the 7th century Islamic conversion, is a cultural confrontation between the forces of modernization and the forces of traditionalism.

Cyrus Vakili-Zad, a noted Iranian scholar, described cultural modernization as a process of “the importation of modern ideas, institutions and technology from the more developed world to the less developed world....intellectuals as carriers of modernity are given the most important role.”¹³ Conversely, traditionalism is typically defined as the simple uncomplicated way of life, and a quest to remain tied to one’s religious or cultural roots.¹⁴ Within Iran, these two cultural forces continue to interact in political and social discourse between the modernizing educated professionals and the economically dependent less educated masses led by the Shi’i *ulama* or clerics. The assassination attempt against President Rafsanjani in 1994 is one recent example of the cultural and political conflict between the reformist elite and the traditionalist religious elements led by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.¹⁵ Several other key historical events illustrate the evolution of this dynamic and are useful in our attempt to understand Iran’s quest for a nuclear weapons capability.

The first event which paints this internal polemic and fuels Iran’s basic mistrust of the West took place in the late 19th century. The Tobacco Rebellion in 1891 pitted Iranian tobacco growers against British and Russian forces who intended to continue the exploitation of cheap Iranian labor in the cultivation of a cash crop.¹⁶ The rebellion against these “modern” states was seen as establishing an “Iranian identity” related more to Shi’i religion as a righteous struggle against western infidels, than in Marxist or

nationalistic terms.¹⁷ The conflict also highlighted the cultural stratification between the vast majority of uneducated Iranians who tended to look inward for strength vis-a-vis the Shi'i clergy and the ruling elite—the *shahs*—who looked outward toward the West for economic backing and modern ideas. The religious spokesman during the rebellion was Haj Shaykh Fazlallah Kajuri, known as Nuri, who studied under the leading Shiite *mujtahid* of the era, Mirza Hasan Shirazi.¹⁸ Nuri was against all forms of “western” reform including the establishment of modern schools and western style constitutionalism, fearing that these reforms would weaken the faith of the Iranian population in religion. He viewed a secular assembly and constitution as contrary to Islam.¹⁹ The rebellion was resolved through the leadership of the clergy at the expense of Britain and the ruling elite in Iran. It was viewed by the clergy as a triumph of traditionalism over modernism. The Tobacco Rebellion underscored two important themes that continue today. First, the importance of the clergy as a power broker in Iranian internal and external affairs. Second, the notion that divine Islamic law is preeminent to man-made law gained strength. Both themes are readily apparent today in the way Iran conducts its business.

The second illustration occurred in the early 20th century during the constitutional era. Despite its opposition to western constitutionalism, the clergy viewed a constitutional struggle more as political expedient rather than a religious concession. The constitution turned out to be a vehicle for a religious agenda. The Iranian Constitution of 1906 declared Shiism as the official religion and ensured only Muslims could be appointed as cabinet ministers.²⁰ The constitution reigned in the unlimited power of the *shahs* through a parliamentary system which reflected both a secular judicial system empowered with making law and the clergy who formed the Supreme Committee charged with oversight of

all bills. The clergy's job was to ensure no law contradicted or harmed Islam.²¹ The clerics were in the driver's seat in the early 20th century. The voice of traditionalism, however, was short lived with the ascendance of the first Pahlavi monarch, Reza Shah, to the throne in 1925, as a result of a British orchestrated coup.²² The clergy would not play such a preeminent role again in Iranian politics until the Revolution of 1979.

Reza Shah and his successor Mohammed Reza Shah had history rewritten in order to downplay the role of Islam in defining the political and cultural course of Iran.²³ Although acknowledging the importance of the clergy, the Pahlavi's took over the driving. Both were modernizers and both embarked on a nationalist campaign to establish Iran as a regional power in the Middle East. The Pahlavi regime was able to forge a political consensus within Iran by playing the nationalism card, providing economic development, modernizing the military, and establishing real growth through the export of oil. The model was the United States, advocated by the Shah who consolidated his powerbase even further, and exiled or punished dissenters after the 1953 CIA backed coup.²⁴ The clergy in opposition, blamed all the hardships in Iran on the Shah's dependency on the United States.

The forces of modernization and traditionalism collided again during the 1979 Islamic Revolution. To be sure, there were other reasons for the Revolution. The economy of Iran during the late 1970s reflected that of the United States—stagflation—high inflation with zero or negative growth. Unemployment was severe as well. Protests led by the countless political and student factions within Iran focused in on the opulent lifestyle and excesses of the Shah brought on, they argued, by his close association with America.²⁵ The Shah, utilizing money from overinflated oil sales, purchased billions of dollars worth

of sophisticated defense equipment from the United States during the seventies while at the same time neglecting domestic infrastructure issues.²⁶ Modernization in Iran during the late 70's left many Iranians disenchanted and disenfranchised. Many Iranians, looking for options, turned to religion for answers and guidance. The clergy, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, reaffirmed once again the power of Islam, and the importance of that tradition within Iran. Khomeini, like Nuri 70 years before, stepped into the power vacuum and tapped into the heart and soul of Iran by reestablishing divine rule over man-made "westernized" law. The Revolution, as the clergy would argue, was *de facto* legitimized because it was the triumph of true believers over non-believers. The dynamic had come full swing back to traditionalism.

As a result of its experience with foreign imperialists in the 19th century, its internal constitutional struggle, and its rejection of a westernized American puppet regime personified in Shah Pahlavi, Iran views outsiders and "outward thinking" Iranians with some suspicion. The 'Persian Paradox', as I call it, is the manifestation of this internal struggle—to remain traditional and overtly reject modernism, while at the same time pursuing a road of economic and military modernization. This paradox became focused after the Iran-Iraq War. The war, which lasted 95 months from 1980 to 1988, and its aftermath not only illustrates this political dichotomy, but clearly provides some of the justification and background behind Iran's desire to go nuclear.

Notes

¹*Access Resource Brief*, "The future of the Non-Proliferation Treaty," March 1995, Volume IX, No. 4., 1.

²"Armaments, Disarmament and International Security," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook 1996*, 1996, 563.

³*Ibid.*, 564.

Notes

⁴Daniel S. Papp, *Contemporary International Relations* (New York: Macmillan College Publishing Company, 1994), 450.

⁵Alvin and Heidi Toffler, *War and Anti-War* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 232.

⁶Roger C. Molander, "The Nuclear Asymptote: On Containing Nuclear Proliferation," *RAND Study*, July 1994, 27-35.

⁷Ibid., xviii.

⁸Michael T. Klare, "The New Rogue Doctrine," *World Politics* 96/97, 1996, 31.

⁹Ibid., 31.

¹⁰Defense Issues Vol. 11, No 92, 1996, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 12 Jan 1997, available from <http://www.dtic.dla.mil/pubs/di96>.

¹¹*Report of the Secretary of Defense to the President and the Congress March 1996*, 9.

¹²Defense News, Vol. 11, no.63, 1996, n.p.; on line, Internet, 12 Jan 1997, available from <http://www.dtic.dla.mil/pubs/di96>.

¹³Cyrus Vakili-Zad, "Collision of Consciousness: Modernization and Development in Iran," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.32, No.3, July 1996, 139.

¹⁴Ibid., 139-140.

¹⁵Paul Beaver, "Iranian Coup in the Cards," *Jane's Sentinel*, Vol. 1., No.6, March 1994, 1.

¹⁶Nikki R. Keddie, "Why has Iran Been Revolutionary?", *Reconstruction and Regional Diplomacy in the Persian Gulf* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 19.

¹⁷Ibid., 20-22.

¹⁸Zad, *Collision of Consciousness*, 141.

¹⁹Ibid., 141.

²⁰Ibid., 140-145.

²¹Ibid., 145.

²²Miron Rezun, "The Pariah Syndrome: The Complexities of the Iranian Predicament," *Iran At The Crossroads*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 11.

²³Ibid., 10.

²⁴Zad, *Collision of Consciousness*, 147.

²⁵"The Islamic Republic of Iran," *Janes's Sentinel*, 1993, 3.

²⁶Geoffrey Kemp, *Forever Enemies: American Policy and the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1994), 21.

Chapter 2

Iran's Nuclear Quest

Iran's quest to acquire nuclear weapons is not only an outcome based on external actors and factors, but also a result of internal political forces as well. The Iran-Iraq war had perhaps the greatest influence on Iran's decision to pursue WMD greater than any other event. As Shahram Chubin, of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, states:

The experience of Iran's leaders during the course of the war has dominated the way they have looked at security since. The first, overwhelmingly clear political lesson was that Iran could not rely on the international community where its defense was concerned, that some states would not be bound by rules governing the conduct of war, and that Iran should seek preparedness accordingly.¹

The war against Baghdad had a profound impact on Iran. Most Iranians decided, if they had not already, that they wouldn't receive any assistance from the West against Iraq unless it was in the West's interest.² Additionally, the Iranians learned that the West wouldn't intervene and stop Iraq's use of chemical weapons (WMD). In fact, most of the world seemed to perceive some sort of moral equivalence between Iraq gassing its neighbor and Iran launching futile "human wave" attacks of teenagers over minefields.³ Despite a relatively modernized military force, due to the relationship between the United States and the Shah in the 1970's, the Iranians found themselves at a loss and technologically unable to deter Iraq's continued use of chemical weapons. Iraq's use of

Scud missiles and virtual air superiority made chemical attacks the preferred method of prosecuting the war in its latter stages. The fight was taken into the cities of Iran. In the spring of 1988 for example, Iraq launched 190 Scud missiles primarily targeted against Tehran and killed, Iran claimed, over 5,000 people.⁴ The Iran-Iraq war taught the Iranians a valuable lesson about the importance of having a credible deterrent force of its own. Iran had none, and they were extremely vulnerable. Clearly, without the means to deter WMD, state survival becomes problematic.

Internally, the Iran-Iraq War demonstrated the inadequacies of religion in the execution of military strategy. The clergy were responsible for the mass frontal attacks of teenagers, called *Basij*, against Iraqi armor throughout the war.⁵ Khomeini, in certain respects, viewed the war as a necessary sacrifice. It served as a post-revolutionary rallying point for Khomeini, a way to consolidate instruments of power under his moral mandate. Religious dogma, however, did not win battles. The strategy of attrition and frontal assaults employed by the Iranian military was called the “defensive Jihad.”⁶ Losses at the front, combined with the Iraqi chemical Scud attacks, and a loss of over 50 percent of its pre-war hardware, persuaded Iran to adopt United Nations Security Council Resolution 598 in July 1988. Resolution 598 called for an immediate cease-fire and a return to pre-war borders.⁷ Hashemi Rafsanjani who was appointed acting commander-in-chief of the Iranian armed forces just one month prior in June was instrumental in bringing the war to an end.⁸ Rafsanjani, who was elected to President in 1989, emerged as a moderating voice within Iran. His popularity has increased even more after the death of Khomeini in 1989. He, more than any other figure within Iran today, has emphasized the importance of readiness and a strong modern military. For Rafsanjani, Iran would never again be put in a

position of weakness. Unable to rapidly reconstitute and modernize its conventional forces, Iran appears, through the leadership of Rafsanjani, to be headed down the nuclear road in order to create a deterrent against aggression. Iran does not want to be given the short end of the stick the next time.

Iran's quest for nuclear power cannot be solely interpreted in terms of a desire to preserve sovereignty. Dr. William Martel, from the Air War College, provides some other compelling reasons behind Iran's motivations for nuclear weapons. These include:⁹

- Domestic Political Pressure
- Political and Military Leverage
- Regional Hegemonical Ambitions

Certainly some, if not all, of these motivations exist today within Iran. As discussed under the heading of "Persian Paradox", Iran wants to retain its form of traditionalism but at the same time be recognized as a legitimate power within the region. There is tremendous pressure within Iran to balance these demands. Iran considers its own role in reviving Islam as central. Much of the rhetoric, wrapped in Shi'i sentiment, reflects a strong sense of grievance with an emphasis on tireless effort, resistance, sacrifice and martyrdom.¹⁰ Iran sees itself as the leader of traditional Islam, and as such, requires a measure of strength to back up its discourse. Possessing nuclear weapons gives a state both a "voice" in determining events within the region, and a means to "retain" its own Islamic identity and cultural values. Political and military leverage is implied merely by the possession of nuclear weapons. Notionally, a country which has nuclear weapons ought to be able to obtain a favorable military or political outcome to a crisis. This, as US leaders know from the examples of Vietnam and Afghanistan, is not always the case. Hegemony within the

Middle East is almost an oxymoron. The relative balance of power has certainly been altered by the Persian Gulf War in favor of Iran, but the economic costs associated with creating a military force comparable to Saudi Arabia or Israel is tremendous. Whether a nuclear weapons capability in itself would arrogate the need for a modern conventional force is questionable. To drive events in the Middle East, Iran will have to continue to modernize its forces as well as build a viable and deliverable nuclear weapons capability.

Clearly, security and a method of regional deterrence stand out among the possible motivations. Iran's experience, as discussed, has reinforced its sense of isolation. The war with Iraq and Iran's ring side seat during Desert Storm have instilled in Iran a healthy respect for military power. The general lessons learned by Iran by these recent events are preparedness, deterrence, and reliance on Islamic tradition to serve as an alternative to western influence. However, as Shahram Chubin remarks:

Iran's sense of grievance, fueled by international apathy at Iraq's use of chemical weapons and missiles against it, now drives it to acquire the same capability as retaliatory weapons to avoid future surprises. Its embryonic nuclear program appears to be designed as a general hedge, an option, rather than a crash program with a particular enemy in mind.¹¹

As a result, following the war with Iraq, Iran has aggressively embarked on a military modernization program to include acquiring nuclear weapons technology and the means to deliver WMD. Assessing Iran's nuclear weapons program may provide some further insight into the motivations and point toward possible implications to US policy in the region.

Nuclear Weapons Assessment

If the quest for a nuclear weapons capability within Iran is the result primarily of state security and deterrence, then one must determine where they are in developing that capability and discuss why the United States is very concerned over the prospect of a nuclear armed Iran. Geoffrey Kemp argues and the evidence supports the fact that getting accurate data on how much Iran is spending on military hardware, including nuclear, is problematic.¹² Reasons for this, beyond the unreliability of published data from Iran, include the transition from western arms suppliers like the United States and Germany to Chinese and North Korean suppliers. Much of the nuclear trade is covert to avoid IAEA inspections and to keep the world guessing on the extent of Iran's nuclear capability and progress. In 1992, however, Iran permitted the IAEA to inspect its listed nuclear facilities and other installations alleged to contain nuclear activity. During these inspections, the IAEA found no incriminating evidence of illegal actions. However, the western intelligence community remains skeptical.¹³ Why?

Both Iraq and North Korea developed viable nuclear weapons programs despite the best intentions of the IAEA. Iran, like Iraq, can legitimately develop the infrastructure and specialist training in nuclear engineering and covertly build nuclear weapons at which time Iran could either withdraw from the NPT or keep its new weapons under wraps. The only alternative, therefore, to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons is to deny Iran all opportunities to develop a nuclear infrastructure to begin with.¹⁴ The current published evidence indicates Iran is pursuing a parallel course of building a legitimate nuclear power capability while covertly developing or *buying* a nuclear weapons capability. What is the evidence?

Russia's agreement to complete Unit One reactor at the nuclear complex in Bushehr, begun by the Germans in the late 1970s illustrates this parallel course. The protocol for the completion of the Bushehr plant, signed by Russian nuclear energy minister Viktor Mikhailov and the President of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) Reza Amrollahi on January 8, 1995, also calls on the two signatory organizations to draft and sign:

Within a six month period of time, a contract for the construction of a uranium shaft in Iran, after which negotiations will be conducted on the signing of a contract for the construction of a centrifuge plant for the enrichment of uranium according to conditions of contracts concluded by Russian organizations with firms of third countries.¹⁵

While at the same time, Russia has insisted that Iran abide by international supervision and nonproliferation rules.¹⁶ The reactor deal, especially the clause for the provision of a centrifuge plant, created concern for the United States, and was a topic of the William J. Clinton-Boris Yeltsin summit in May 1995. Despite earlier claims by the Russians that there was no contract for a centrifuge, Yeltsin later stated, "the contract indeed has elements of both peaceful and military power engineering."¹⁷ It appears, Iran is building a nuclear infrastructure in order to produce weapon's grade fissile material. The unclassified list below indicates known and planned nuclear facilities in Iran:

1. Bushehr	2 power reactors	85% complete as of 1995
2. Bonab	low power reactors	construction started 1994
3. Darkhovin	Chinese built	estimated completion date 2002
4. Esfahan	Chinese built and underground	
5. Esteghlal	Chinese built	estimated completion date 2005
6. Gorgan	Russian nuclear technicians	
7. Karaj	Chinese calutron	near completion
8. Mo'allem	possible uranium enrichment site	
9. Tehran	uses 20% Argentinian enriched uranium	operational
10. Yazd	high-grade uranium mine (est 5,000 cubic tons) ¹⁸	

Several important factors are apparent in the list above which may confirm the west's skepticism over Iran's nuclear power intentions.

First, the relative maturity of Iran's nuclear infrastructure despite its abundant oil reserves is cause for concern. Certainly, nuclear power is critical to a country which may not have an indigenous energy supply like France, but is, from a cost-benefit analysis, very expensive for Iran which has tremendous energy resources. The nuclear program in Iraq, for example, involved investments of over \$10 billion dollars, which in Iran's case, equates to nearly 3-5 years of total defense expenditure.¹⁹

Secondly, the list shows functional similarity to Iraq's clandestine uranium enrichment program that used three different methods to make weapon's grade material: electromagnetic isotope separation—the calutron method; chemical enrichment; and gaseous centrifuge enrichment.²⁰ In Iran's case, Karaj and Esfahan house the calutron for the production of radioisotopes; Bushehr and Mo'allem Kalayeh the gas centrifuges; and, the Tehran factory has the ability to chemically enrich to plutonium.²¹ Of these methods, gas centrifuge technology is the least expensive, and, because it requires a much smaller facility, lends itself nicely to clandestine development of weapons.²²

Thirdly, the number of “outside” contracts, deals, technical support, and potential nuclear black marketing of fissile material is cause for concern. For the United States, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was good and bad news. The Bear is dead, but there are plenty of cubs running around looking for a source of hard currency. Most worrisome, is the apparent loss of control over FSU nuclear weapons material. In 1994 alone, the Russian Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSB) reported to President Yeltsin that over 900 thefts from military and nuclear plants and 700 thefts of secret technology had

occurred in the second half of 1993.²³ A report from the US General Accounting Office in March 1996 linked lax control over fissile materials to several thefts in the FSU. Also, John Deutch, CIA director, told the Senate in 1996, that the route through Afghanistan is of particular interest in the trade of fissile material.²⁴ The purchase of such material could save Iran 8-10 years on their weapons program.²⁵ While the 1992 Cooperative Threat Reduction program (Nunn-Lugar) has put some control on the disposition of nuclear weapons and associated material through monetary incentives to the FSU, the threat of proliferation via theft and black marketing remains acute. Additionally, highly skilled Russian nuclear technicians are being recruited by Iran to improve/accelerate their nuclear program. According to Jane's Intelligence Review, Russian technicians earn about \$67 a month in Russia while Iran is offering them \$5,000 a month.²⁶

Finally, the connection between China and Iran is disturbing. Not the least of which is the pace at which China developed its own nuclear program in 1956 and conducted their first nuclear test in October 1964.²⁷ Prevented from modernizing their military using western hardware, Iran has turned to China and North Korea for arms. Iran's Defense Minister, Mohammad Forouzandeh visited Beijing in August 1996, and signed a defense deal worth \$4.5 billion.²⁸ China's rationale for assisting Iran goes beyond the sale of arms to one of using Iran as a surrogate or proxy against the United States in the Middle East. China continues to modernize its military and "thumb its nose" at the US, played out most recently, in the live-fire exercise near Taiwan in 1996. China's "nuclear card" is a useful tool if only to dissuade the United States from attempting to threaten China.²⁹ Likewise, China's direct assistance to Iran will offer a similar effect against the United States in the Gulf region. The US has voiced strong opposition over China's negotiation to sell two

additional 300-MWe power reactors and associated fuel production facilities to Iran. This issue was raised just before the NPT conference in April 1995—and the Chinese have publicly rejected US pressure.³⁰

The rhetoric from Iran regarding the pursuit of a nuclear weapons program is contradictory at best. For example, in 1991 Ayatollah Mohajerani, one of President Rafsanjani's deputies said, “since the enemy has atomic capabilities, Islamic countries must be armed with the same capacity.”³¹ Yet, Defense Minister Akbar Torkan said in 1993, that Iran's nuclear policy is “entirely peaceful and that it is entitled to have access as any other country to nuclear technology for civilian and industrial uses.”³² The rhetoric from Iran generally dismisses WMD as fundamentally anti-Islamic. Like most statements and proclamations from Iran, there are subtle undertones and attempts at manipulating the media. Some of the information reflects that internal dynamic—the ‘Persian Paradox’—and some is clearly directed at the United States, which Iran views with great apprehension. While accepting responsibility for nuclear power facilities, Iran denies claims of a nuclear weapons program as American paranoia. Comments from the Clinton administration and Congress seem to underscore this feeling of threat. Former Secretary of State Warren Christopher referred to Iran as an “outlaw state” and “public enemy number one,” while Newt Gingrich said Iran's desire for nuclear weapons is “to annihilate Tel Aviv and in the long run annihilate Chicago or Atlanta.”³³ Iran, it seems, views US rhetoric as an attempt to justify massive arms sales to other Gulf States and Israel. Chubin suggests, however, that Iran may be provoking the United States deliberately in order to *find* justification for developing a nuclear weapons program:

Here the United States aids Iran's subterfuge: the more hostile and selective the United States is in its attitude toward Iran, the more Tehran can depict US accusations as punitive and distorted, motivated by hostility. In this way Iran may even seek to undermine the motivation behind US intelligence which is critical in the new inspection systems for chemical and nuclear weapons detection.³⁴

At the political level, it may be a game of words and subtle manipulation when assessing Iran's nuclear weapons program, but there is strong evidence to suggest otherwise when viewed along with other strategic programs. As with the construction of nuclear facilities within Iran, there appears to be more than meets the eye when it comes to Iran's ballistic missile program.

Still smarting from its ballistic missile asymmetry during the war with Iraq, Iran has turned to China and North Korea for assistance. By August 1993, according to intelligence estimates, Iran had acquired North Korean Nodong 1 short-range ballistic missiles. The Nodong missiles are reputed to have a range of nearly 1300 km or twice the range of Iraq's SS-1 Scud Bs.³⁵ The United States alleges that Iran has paid North Korea \$600 million for further development of the Nodong missile to deliver nuclear or chemical warheads.³⁶ In 1992, North Korean ships were reported to have delivered Scuds to Iranian ports, though both Iranian and North Korean officials denied this.³⁷ Most analysts agree that the inaccuracy of missiles currently in service suggests that the new weapons [?] are intended for WMD purposes.³⁸

Carefully looking at the information available, it seems Iran is in the embryonic stages of a nuclear weapons program and in the early stages of a ballistic missile capability. Yet there is no evidence to suggest that the Iranians are anywhere close to Iraq's capabilities when the United States launched Desert Storm. Reviewing current nuclear strategy

suggests that most states comply openly with the NPT while either covertly developing nuclear weapons on their own, or electing not to pursue a nuclear program at all. The exceptions, namely Israel, Pakistan and India, are well known to possess a nuclear capability, but for strategic and political reasons, chose not to sign the NPT. Iran, based on the evidence presented, is following the strategy of Iraq—overt compliance with covert WMD production—to promote its Islamic identity and forge a deterrent capability. How soon will Iran possess nuclear weapons given its covert production schedule? Current US and Israeli intelligence sources estimate Iran will have nuclear weapons in a 5-10 year time frame—barring a black market technological leap.³⁹

Partially preventing Iran from accelerating its nuclear program is the hard economic reality involved in creating a nuclear weapon and the means to deliver it. Despite attempts to rapidly modernize conventional forces following the war with Iraq, Iran has cut defense spending from a high of \$5.8 billion in 1991, to around \$2-3 billion today—about 3% its Gross Domestic Product (GDP).⁴⁰

However, like most information from Iran there's contradiction. For example, Iranian Defense Minister Akbar Torkan insisted in 1993, that his defense budget was only \$750 million while Hassan Ruhani, Deputy Parliamentary Speaker, disclosed in November 1996, that Iran had been spending \$2.7 billion a year since 1988 on defense.⁴¹ One factor is clear, defense modernization to include a nuclear weapons and ballistic missile program is expensive. High foreign debt accrued during the Iran-Iraq war has led to high inflation and a devalued currency—the *riyal*. This, combined with the recent declaration in 1995 by US President Clinton (Executive Order I) to ban all US financial and commercial dealings with Iran, has put tremendous strain upon the Iranian economy.⁴² Iran, therefore,

cannot afford to maintain both a well equipped modern army and nuclear weapons program without exacting a serious toll on the people. In order to sustain the economy at current levels Iran cannot afford to spend over 3% of GDP on defense. If this equates to roughly \$3 billion a year then it will be *at least* 5-10 years before Iran can fully develop a nuclear weapons program.

Although it appears Iran's motivation for a nuclear capability is driven by creating a viable deterrent against the use of WMD from hostile nations, the United States cannot afford to let Iran pursue its own WMD program without adequate checks and balance. The time for the United States to leverage a desirable outcome vis-a-vis Iran's nuclear ambitions is now. The implications of a nuclear armed Iran for the United States are too great to put off until tomorrow. Therefore, a workable counter strategy must be developed and implemented by the United States and its partners within the region as soon as possible.

Notes

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⁶Rezun, *Iran at the Crossroads*, "Iran and The War," by Shahram Chubin, 134.

⁷*Janes's Sentinel*, 1993, 5.

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⁹William C. Martel and William T. Pendley, *Nuclear Coexistence: Rethinking U.S. Policy to Promote Stability in an Era of Proliferation* (Maxwell AFB: Air University Press, 1994) Air War College Studies in National Security No.1., 101-103.

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¹¹Chubin, *Iran National Security Policy*, 75.

¹²Kemp, *Forever Enemies: American Policy and the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 53.

¹³Ibid., pg.58.

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¹⁶“Russia Set to Supply Iran, China With Nuclear Plants,” *Wall Street Journal*, Feb 12., 1993, p.A10.

¹⁷“An Assessment of Iran’s Nuclear Facilities,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, Monterey Institute of International Studies, Spring-Summer 1995, Vol. 2., No.3., 3.

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¹⁹David A. Kay, “Denial and Deception Practices of WMD Proliferators: Iraq and Beyond,” *World Politics* 96/97, 1996, 210.

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²¹“An Assessment of Iran’s Nuclear Facilities,” 4.

²²*Strategic Assessment 1996* (Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1996), Institute For National Strategic Studies, 1996, 94.

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²⁴Ibid., pg 423.

²⁵Ibid., pg 423.

²⁶Ibid., pg 423.

²⁷*Nuclear Weapons Databook*: Vol. V-British, French, and Chinese Nuclear Weapons (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 324.

²⁸James Bruce, “Iran and China in \$4.5 billion partnership,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 11 Sept 1996, 3.

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³⁰“Nonproliferation, Arms Control, Disarmament,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook 1996*, 1995, 582.

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³²“Islamic Republic of Iran, Sentinel: The Gulf States,” *Jane’s information Group*, Sept 1993, 4.

³³Donald Neff, “Anti-Iran Fever,” *Middle East Insight*, 2 Feb 1996, 10.

³⁴Chubin, *Iran National Security Policy*, 54.

³⁵“Islamic Republic of Iran, Sentinel: The Gulf States,” *Jane’s Information Group*, 1993, pg.9.

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³⁷Douglas Jehl, “Iran Is Reported Acquiring Missiles,” *New York Times*, April 8, 1993, A9.

³⁸Chubin, *Iran National Security Policy*, 59.

³⁹ Greg J. Gerardi, “An Assessment of Iran’s Nuclear Facilities,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, Spring-Summer 1995, Vol. 2., No.3., 4.

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⁴²George A. Nader, “Interview With President Clinton,” *Middle East Insight*, November-December 1995, Vol. XII, No.1., 16.

Chapter 3

US Strategy and Alternatives

Our vision for the future of the Middle East is a simple one. We want to see the establishment of a peaceful and prosperous region in which all nations and peoples can live in freedom and security. There is much work still before us, but we are making real progress toward our goal.

—President Clinton

The quest for WMD within the Middle East is a primary concern for the United States in the formulation of its national security policy and strategy. No other region represents such a threat to US vital interests as does the Middle East. The proliferation of WMD in the Middle East has profound implications for maintaining peace and stability within the region. Since the demise of Iraq's nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) weapons program following Desert Storm, Iran has emerged as the next rogue proliferator within the region. Despite Iran's "public" pronouncement that the use of WMD is contrary to Islam, the United States remains concerned. The United States, keenly aware of the steps taken by Iraq's clandestine nuclear weapons program, has decided to take an aggressive approach in dealing with Iran now rather than later. However, is the United States' current punitive policy toward Iran the most effective strategy in securing the desired outcome within the region—long term peace and stability? And, what are some alternatives to this policy?

The United States' policy toward Iran is fundamentally suspicious and hostile. Events since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 have shaped this response. The destruction of the US Embassy in Tehran, the taking of US hostages, the attacks on the US Marine barracks in Beirut, the bombing of the US Embassy in Kuwait, major airline hijackings, the holding of Americans in Lebanon, and the unprovoked naval gunship attacks on US flag vessels during the mid-1980s form the basis for the United States' extreme mistrust of Iran. As a result, since 1979, Iran has borne the brunt of numerous US executive and congressional constraints to include military and economic trade sanctions. As Kemp states, "With the exception of just a few items, imports from Iran have been illegal since 1987. No bilateral diplomatic relations exist, and the United States has maintained a continuous state of national emergency with respect to Iran since the hostage taking of 1979."¹

Since Desert Storm, the United States has viewed Iran and Iraq as the two states most likely to cause instability within the wider context of the Middle East. The Clinton administration in order to protect US vital interests has embarked on a policy of dual containment in response. Under dual containment, the United States will preserve the balance of power in the Middle East by "containing" the potentially destabilizing affects of a regional aggressor while protecting its own interests with the assistance of other Gulf states and Israel. What dual containment really means is the isolation of rogue states with the ultimate goal of causing economic destabilization and eventual internal collapse or change of policy. The US administration has aggressively targeted both the regimes of Iraq and Iran with economic sanctions and political pressure with the goal of further isolating those countries in an effort to cause internal conflict and domestic problems. Although Edward Djerjian, assistant secretary for Near East affairs, denied this was the

Clinton administration's intent when he testified before a House Foreign Affairs Committee; according to Djerjian, the administration does "not seek a total embargo or quarantine of Iran...We do not seek to overturn the Iranian government...Our policy does not exclude dialogue with Iran."² Yet, the US policy of dual containment does not *foster* dialogue either, it creates greater mistrust and increases the level of divisiveness.

From Iran's perspective, mistrust toward the West stems from our previous discussion on the historical contextual factors played out since the late 19th century until now. Iran is above all suspicious of US intentions in the Gulf. Two wars in the Persian Gulf have consolidated US ties with Arab states and have resulted in a permanent US military presence there. As Chubin argues, the United States remains a hostile adversary toward Iran, "seeking to undo the regime and contain its Islamic revolutionary message."³ Recent trade sanctions as a result of President Clinton's Executive Order I in 1995 confirm Iran's notion that the United States is attempting to isolate them and further destabilize their economy. Iran's mistrust of the United States is compounded by media reports in early 1996 surrounding a secret \$18 million CIA initiative to topple the Khameini regime in Tehran.⁴ As a result of Clinton's demonization campaign against Iran as part of the overall dual containment strategy within the Middle East, neither party is talking to each other while WMD are still being constructed.

While dual containment may "contain" a problem state for the short term, it is not a preferable long term strategy. For the United States, containment of Iraq and Iran costs money. The US has incurred nearly \$400 million in incremental costs to send 30,000 troops to the Persian Gulf in 1994 to deter another possible Iraqi attack on Kuwait. Each exercise conducted with Saudi Arabia or Kuwait costs over \$10 million. Additionally, the

US has deployed on several occasions and allocated resources in order to monitor Iranian exercises on or near Gulf islands.⁵ The economic costs to the United States for maintaining a strict trade embargo on both Iran and Iraq is incalculable but certainly significant. Further, While the hegemonic and aggressive aspirations of Iraq have been confirmed by recent history, it is doubtful whether Iran can be considered in the same light. Direct military intervention was necessary to curb Iraq's intentions and roll back their WMD program, however, to apply the same approach to Iran is questionable and fraught with some danger. To further isolate and destabilize a country which may soon possess WMD is tempting fate and relinquishing control over the situation. Dual containment, therefore, is certainly not a panacea, and may indeed, be the wrong approach to take with Iran.

When considering an alternative strategy with Iran two factors immediately come to mind. First, long term peace within the Middle East. Second, the WMD issue within Iran. The two are interrelated but require separate approaches. Long term peace within the Middle East at a simplistic level, requires at a minimum, the full cooperation and interface between all the players in the region. The United States cannot, on the one hand, extend military aid and economic support to Saudi Arabia and Israel, and on the other hand, isolate nations like Iran through punitive economic measures without causing a *de facto* strategic imbalance. Certainly, the Arab-Israeli peace process highlights the importance of bringing all players together in order to establish a lasting peace. If the United States offers a series of economic incentives to Iran based on their willingness to sign a comprehensive peace accord with other Arab nations and eventually Israel it will be a step in the right direction. Implicit in any agreement with Iran is the requirement for dialogue.

The United States should understand culturally the importance of the Iranian clergy and recognize too the moderating elements within Iran and attempt to work constructively with both elements. Conversely, the position toward any Iranian aggression should be made plain in terms of military force if necessary. By establishing the criteria for long term peace and offering incentives to accomplish those objectives, the United States can exercise some control over the process.

This “foot-in-the-door” (FID) strategy would also afford the US a degree of control over Iran’s WMD efforts. Critical to the success of nonproliferation within the Middle East are three key factors. First, Israel must become a member of the NPT. This would send a clear and honest message to the Arab nations and Iran that Israel is willing to conform to an international nuclear standard, and it may induce Iran to establish some dialogue with Israel. Second, numerous and verifiable inspections of Iran’s nuclear program to include ballistic missile sites similar to the 1995 Agreed Framework between the United States and North Korea. The Framework allowed the North Koreans to close its existing nuclear facilities, remain party to the NPT and allow the IAEA to apply full safeguard procedures to its facilities. In return, North Korea was provided with money to import two light-water reactors (LWRs) over a 10-year period and fuel oil to substitute for nuclear power.⁶ In effect, the United States should attempt to control the technology Iran receives, instead of *forcing* Iran into a covert nuclear program. Finally, the United States should call for and enforce through the United Nations a resolution calling for the development of internationally recognized nuclear-weapon free zones (NWFZ) in the Middle East similar to the initiative passed during the 1995 NPT Review.⁷ The overall effect of this three-pronged approach in conjunction with establishing some dialogue with

Iran clearly offers the United States more flexibility and control over events in the Middle East and greater involvement potentially in Iran's nuclear program.

Conclusion

The security challenge brought on by the end of the Cold War may in fact be a far greater challenge to the United States than that of the Cold War itself. The US had nearly 50 years to perfect its strategy of deterrence with the old USSR. The strategic climate today offers a much greater opportunity to inject "new blood" into the nuclear proliferation equation while at the same time presenting many trip wires. The proliferation of WMD in the Middle East is one such trip wire. For the United States to successfully engage and enlarge, all players and all factors must be taken into account when formulating a successful counter proliferation strategy.

The divide between the United States and Iran is great but not unbridgeable. There are many reasons for each side to distrust the other. Iran's paranoia of the West stems from its occupation in the 19th century by imperialistic nations concerned only for profit, to a US CIA backed coup to reinstall a despotic leader. The United States, too, has significant reasons for its suspicion and concern regarding Iran's nuclear weapons program. The US is seemingly convinced that Iran will transport its form of Islam through the use of a nuclear or chemical device. Despite Iran's willingness to sign the NPT and allow IAEA inspections, there remains legitimate concerns over the covert nature of Iran's nuclear program fueled in part by the accessibility of nuclear components on the black market. Each nation has resorted to a war of words alleging the worst intentions of the other.

Iran's quest for nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles is likely centered on their recent experience with chemical weapon attacks by Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war. Iran's very survival was tested and nearly lost by a nation which possessed WMD and had the means and will to deliver them. Iran will not allow itself to be put in that position again. Although some element of prestige and leverage is associated with a nuclear weapon, Iran's primary motivation is to create a viable deterrent capability.

Assessing Iran's nuclear weapons program is difficult given the inconsistent nature of the information available. It appears Iran is still in the relatively early stages of a nuclear program, but will have the means over several years to create nuclear weapons grade material. The hardware and technical expertise sold to the Iranians by the Chinese, Russians, and North Koreans will undoubtedly shorten the period of time needed to develop a nuclear weapon much to the consternation of the United States. The Chinese and North Koreans are also providing Iran a means to deliver WMD.

The United States, as a result, has pursued a dual containment policy designed to isolate and destabilize both Iraq and Iran through tough political and economic sanctions. Although effective in the short term, the current US strategy does not adequately address the long term objective of a comprehensive peace in the Middle East and may in fact decrease the control over the proliferation of WMD in Iran.

As an alternative strategy, the United States must carefully and equitably distribute economic and military assistance within the Middle East in order to preclude creating a *de facto* regional imbalance of power. Critical to leveraging peace within the Middle East is fair and honest dialogue aimed at long term solutions and not divisive and inflammatory rhetoric. On a parallel front, the United States should pursue reasonable measures to

control Iran's WMD in the context of the entire region. First, Israel must be brought on board the NPT wagon. Second, an Agreement Framework similar to the one negotiated with the North Koreans should be pursued with Iran in order to control the level and type of nuclear technology. Finally, the United Nations, through US leadership, should enact and enforce a resolution calling for the complete ban of nuclear weapons within the Middle East.

The question is, can the US put aside its fear of Islam and pursue an “open door” strategy with Iran in order to establish a meaningful and long term peace in the Middle East? Or, should the US continue to commit resources and possibly lives to contain the inevitable?

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